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Facing the Horror in Guatemala

During her frightened 48 hours in Guatemala, Patricia Garcia Crowther was so consumed by fear that she went sleepless. The native of Guatemala, who is in her early thirties and has lived in Toronto for the past 10 years, had returned to her homeland for two reasons. Her brother, Edgar Fernando Garcia, a trade unionist and university student, has been missing since his abduction in February 1984. Crowther wanted to offer comfort to her brother's wife, Nineth Garcia.

The other purpose of the trip was to deliver an award to the Guatemalan human-rights organization—the Mutual Support Group for the Appearance, Alive, of Our Children, Spouses, Parents, and Brothers and Sisters.

Many Latin American countries have such coalitions. The methods and goals are the same: to visit the jails, police stations and morgues seeking information about family members who have disappeared. In 1976 in Argentina, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo was formed to find between 7,000 and 9,000 of the abducted. El Salvador has the CO-MADRES, a group of mothers in a country where the president said last September that the disappearances and murders of 45,000 people would never be solved because "the state is incapable of prosecuting the criminals."

Guatemala's Mutual Support Group was founded in June 1984. Its current membership is more than 700 families. Last month it received the Letelier-Moffitt Memorial Human Rights Award from Washington's Institute for Policy Studies. In late July, Americans were told about the group in the lead essay of The New Yorker's notes and comment section.

The magazine, which for years has been an unflagging advocate of human rights, quoted from a 1984 report by a delegation of British members of Parliament: "In a 30-year war against their own people, the Guatemalan military have created a nation of widows and orphans. Over 100,000 people have been killed and 38,000 disappeared. Throughout 1984, the killings and disappearances have continued and there has been no significant improvement in the human-rights situation—if anything it has worsened since 1983 . . . The evidence points inexorably to the state security apparatus as being responsible for these crimes."

As she returned to Guatemala after 10 years, Crowther's fear was that of an outsider who comes to a scene of violence and sees the horror freshly, while those who are caught up in its dailiness have somehow learned the ways of survival and adjustment. Her sister-in-law, Nineth Garcia, is one of two founders of the Mutual Support Group still active, out of the original six. Among the other four founders, Hector Gomez disappeared in March. He had been the press spokesman. When his mutilated corpse was found, his tongue had been hacked out of his mouth. A week after, Maria Rosario Gody, another cofounder, was found dead next to her slain 2-year-old son and brother. The baby's fingernails had been torn off.

The recounting of such grisliness is necessary because it is the one detail that tends to be overlooked in foreign policy discussions. The Reagan administration is fast moving away from the suspension of military sales to the Guatemalan government that had prevailed in the late 1970s. In the gangsterism of the army and security forces, the administration sees nothing especially objectionable. It went to Congress in February with a request to increase military assistance from $300,000 to $35.3 million.

The same month, the State Department announced a "very strong and impressive trend" toward democracy in Latin America, with the promise of November elections in Guatemala a part of that trend. Doubts now exist that the election will be held, with many believing it will be meaningless anyway. It's a case of heads-the-army-wins and tails-the-civilians-lose. The alliance of the rich and the military, which has been the curse of Guatemala since the 1954 violent CIA-backed coup, has led to an economy devastated by inflation (as high as 60 percent) and unemployment and underemployment (47 percent). Socially, Guatemala is another Haiti with excessively high rates of illiteracy and infant mortality.

Crowther's fears for her life in the two days she went to Guatemala were no passing bout of paranoia. Her sister-in-law receives phoned and mailed death threats regularly. Nineth Garcia would have traveled to Washington herself to receive the award but she feared being barred from reentry. Crowther's concerns were diminished somewhat because James Manly, a member of the Canadian Parliament, traveled with her. According to the Institute for Policy Studies, a U.S. congressman, long active in human rights, was asked to go to Guatemala to present the award. He declined due to worries about safety.

Manly confessed to being nervous while in Guatemala. He knew the score. To that government, what's a dead Canadian politician? The deeper emotion, Manly said, was disbelief at how a regime of killers could keep on slaying thousands of its own citizens and yet remain confident that its patrons in Washington would continue to send money and praise.